NEW HAMPSHIRE CONFERENCE
AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED PAPERS

SUBJECT: ABUSED WOMEN'S DECISIONS:
TO STAY OR LEAVE
ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABUSED WOMAN'S DECISION:
TO STAY OR LEAVE AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is inherent in all intimate relationships. The alarming aspect of wife abuse is that many women choose to remain in their violent relationships, even though they may risk severe injury or death. Most research on family violence has focused on violence in marital relationships, implying that violence begins with marriage. Straus et. al (1980) speak of the marriage license as a "hitting licence." Bernard and Bernard (1983) suggest that patterns of violence are established even before couples marry. Many dating couples who experience violence do not break up. Of the respondents in Henton's et al. (1983) and Cate's et al. (1982) studies, 41% and 53% respectively were still dating the partner with whom the violence had occurred. Females may remain in a violent dating relationship for some of the same reasons wives remain in violent marriages.

In both marital and pre-marital relationships, females more often than males indicated that they were victims of abuse (Bernard and Bernard, 1983; Henton et al., 1983, Gelles, 1974; Makepeace, 1981; Makepeace et al., 1983). Since violent relationships are maintained over a number of years, and since females appeared to be victimized more often than males, this paper will focus on some of the factors that may affect a female's decision to remain in a violent relationship.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Before presenting a summary of the conclusions suggested by the research in the dynamics of leaving an abusive relationship, it is necessary to note the methodological problems inherent in most of these research studies. Any conclusions from this research are ultimately limited by the validity of the methods used, and the conduct of future research may profit from an explication of these limitations. Michael J. Strupe has identified some limitations of research in the area of relationship decisions.

a) One of the most common problems with research in this area is the selective nature of the samples. None of the studies have used a random sampling method and thus the representativeness of the sample is unknown. Indeed most of the empirical studies examined women who initially sought aid at a shelter and these women may differ in important ways from those who never appear at shelters.

b) A second problem is the retrospective nature of research in this area. The decision to leave or remain with an abuser may be unstable and change over time.

c) A third problem in this area is over-reliance on self-report data. One solution is the attempt to collect both objective and subjective measures of the same underlying variable or process (e.g. Kalmuss and Straus, 1982; Strube and Barbour, 1983, 1984).

d) The studies differ widely in the number and types of variables that are measured. Because of the complex interrelationships among these variables, a lack of commonality across studies makes interpretation and comparison difficult.

e) Lack of comparison groups - Comparison groups are needed to show that unsheltered women return to their abusers at different rates. As a result, it is not clear that residence in a shelter per se is associated with any difference in likelihood of returning to the abuser (Sedlak, A.J., 1983).

With the above limitations in mind, the research in this area does provide several insights into the dynamics of leaving an abusive relationship and indicates several consistencies that should be highlighted.

FACTORS AFFECTING DECISIONS TO STAY OR LEAVE AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

Several psychological, socio-psychological and social factors, such as traditional sexual ideology (Pagelow, 1981), fear (Martin, 1976), poor self-image (Truninger, 1971), hope that the husband will reform (Roy, 1977), or feelings of love or sorrow for him (Lay Ford, 1975; Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Conroy, 1982) have been hypothesized to influence the decision of women to remain or abandon their partners. This paper discusses only those factors affecting the decision of abused women described in some of the New Hampshire Conference papers on relationships decisions.

One of the most influential explanations of factors is advanced by Gelles which is an important summary of accumulated information (Carlson, 1977; Chapman, 1978; MacLeod, 1980; Dobash et al., 1978). He has presented three factors involved in abused wives staying:

1) wives economic dependence on husbands;
2) exposure of violence in childhood in earlier heterosexual relationships;
3) and the number of injuries received during the current abuse and the number of issues associated with the abuse.

A literature review regarding factors affecting the decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship identified the above mentioned factors as well as other factors. The following are the important factors identified in some of the New Hampshire Papers which influenced the decisions of the battered women.

1) Economic Dependence

Lack of independent employment outside the home makes it difficult for the woman to leave (Strube and Barbour; 1983, 1984; Gelles, 1976).

2) Experience of Violence

Females who experience violence in their families of origin may consider aggression an accepted method to deal with anger and frustration. Research support that a female experiencing violence as a child is more likely to experience and tolerate violence in a courtship and, later in marriage. The abused women in Stacey and Shupe's study (1983) reported observing violence between their parents and 26% reported being abused as children.

The research conducted by J. Legg et al. also confirms that a female growing up in a violent family was more likely to be a victim of courtship violence especially if she had been severely punished as a child. Straus et al. (1980) found a relationship between growing up in a violent household and being the aggressor in a marital relationship.

3) Severity of Abuse

The more severe the abuse, the more likely the woman will seek some form of intervention with divorce or separation as opposed to calling police (Gelles, 1976). The research study of J. Legg et al., also supports this point that the severity of the injury she received affected the decision to end the relationship.

The research findings suggest a female who experiences mild, non-injurious forms of violence may feel, that despite these incidents, the rewards of the relationship outweigh the costs - ours is such a couple-oriented society that the female may view remaining in the relationship more rewarding than the loneliness and perceived loss of status that is associated with being single.

4) Frequency of Violence

It seems it is not only the severity of violence, but also the frequency of violence that may affect the female's decision to remain with or leave a violent partner. A female may be more likely to leave a relationship in which she is a victim of frequent violence, perhaps because she is more likely to see the situation as threatening and may be more fearful that she will be harmed in the future. She may rationalize the infrequent incidents of violence as simple outbursts of anger if they do not occur regularly.

Contrary to these findings, Gelles study (1976) indicate that women who were hit frequently (weekly to daily) most often called police to intervene whereas women hit less frequently (at least once a month) opted for divorce or separation.

5) Psychological Commitment

The degree of psychological commitment and the length of relationship appear to influence the battered woman's decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship. The more committed a woman is to the relationship, the harder it is to justify psychologically that leaving is the best alternative (Strube and Barbour, 1983). Moreover, the longer a woman has been a member of a relationship, the more committed she becomes and the more likely she will become "entrapped" in the relationship (Strube and Barbour, 1983, 1984).

The research conducted by J. Legg et al. on violent dating relationship also supports this thesis that the longer the couple has been dating and the more emotionally involved the relationship the less likely the female will choose to terminate the relationship due to violence. Many may stay with their violent partners despite abuse because of emotional involvement.

6) No where else to go (Strube and Barbour).

RESEARCH ON DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Gelles (1976) found no evidence that women who left the relationship were better educated, more likely to be employed or had fewer children than those women who remained.

Strube and Barbour identified the following variables that did not appear to discriminate women who left the relationship from those who remained: marital status, number of children, presence of child abuse, presence of alcohol as precipitating event, number of previous abusive relationships and presence of social support.

A number of authors argue that the desire of women to escape abusive marital relationships is by itself insufficient as a basis for their behavior; also needed are societal resources and instrumentalities in the form of programs and agencies which could be responsive to the special needs of abused women and which would facilitate the social transition in the domestic life the women seek. These include safe places, programs to ensure economic independence of abused women, restructuring of child care arrangements, etc.

RELATIONSHIP DECISIONS OF THE BATTERED WIVES WHO SEEK HELP IN SHELTERS

In spite of the current growth in the number and quality of shelters for abused women in the USA (Tierney, 1982) and the increasing number of women availing themselves of these places (Zagaria, et al., 1976; Miller, 1975), very little is known of their operation, their clientele, and their effects on the families. B.E. Aguirre's paper "Why Do They Return? Abused Wives in Shelters" is an effort in this direction. It asks two questions:

1) what characteristics of married women affect their decision to return to their husbands? and
2) what is the relationship between shelter experiences and the decision to separate from their husbands?

The research shows that about half of all women who seek some form of aid from spouse abuse can be expected to return to their partners (e.g., 42% Giles-Sims, 1983; 53% Hilberman and Munson, 1978; 50%, Korlath, 1979; 28%, Labell, 1979; 57% Pfouts, 1978; 68%, Rounsaville, 1978; 60%, Snyder and Fructman, 1981; 24%, Walker, 1983). This return rate is alarming because women usually seek help for their abuse when it becomes life threatening.

CAUSES

It is plausible to assume that the same bonds that keep a woman from leaving an abusing man will bring her back to him after a period of time in the shelter.

In their research, Snyder and Scheer (1981) found that 55% of the 74 women contacted were living with their assailants after two months following discharge. Women who returned were more likely to be (a) married to their assailants; (b) have had longer term relationships compared to women who were not living with their abusive partners; (c) affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.

FREQUENCY AND SEVERITY OF VIOLENCE

The research conducted by Loretta Butehorn on 29 abused women who came to a shelter in Suburban Boston for a temporary residence shows some differences between women who returned to their abusers and those who did not return. For the return group violence had not increased in frequency or severity to the degree that it had for the No Return group, and had not spread too widely to their children. These Returned women tried to solve their problem with violence by continuing to see it as a relational problem which needed to be solved by finding a solution within the relationship.

SOCIAL NETWORK

Battered women are considerably influenced by their social networks. The research conducted by Loretta Butehorn suggests that the women who did not return to their abusers (NR Group) had a higher proportion of their networks (95%) encouraging leaving as compared to those women who returned (R) to their abusers (70%). Both groups were about the same in the recognition of having problems with their spouses and their dissatisfaction with their life circumstances.

The NR Group scored significantly higher than the R Group on network feedback item "Worth". NR Group was receiving network feedback that they are competent in their roles and that their network would be there to help them. On the other hand, the women who returned to their batterers were receiving network feedback that they were not competent in their roles and would receive little network assistance if they left the batterer.

IMPACT OF SHELTERS

The impact of shelters is measured by non-return rates. In fact, non-return rates have been the most accessible and most frequently reported outcome measure in shelters. But as an indicator of shelter impact, they are inadequate in two respects: first, they are severely limited, and in focusing on them, we ignore other important benefits of a shelter. Even those women who do return to their battering partners may have psychologically progressed toward a more permanent separation in the future or may substantially alter their relationships as a result of their shelter stay (Colorado Association for Aid to Battered Women, 1979; Ridington, 1977-78; Seward, 1980; Snyder and Scheer, 1980; Vaughan, 1979, Walker, 1978).

The study of B.E. Aguirre "Why do they Return? Abused Wives in Shelters", documents the importance of shelters for battered wives in providing a safe setting where abused women decide their future lines of action. The following are the principal findings of the study:

- The probability of wives returning to abusive husbands increases considerably if their husbands are their sole source of income.

- The greater the number of decisions taken by the respondents while in the shelters, the more they tend to separate from their husbands.

- The respondents who evaluate the shelters as very useful have a higher tendency to return to their husbands.

- The different types of shelter services they need - the greater the number of shelter services they used, the more likely they are to separate from abusive husbands.

- If abusive husbands are not in counselling, wives are more likely to separate from them.

The results of the study suggest that a decision to stay or return occurs in a social context shaped by the organizational characteristics of the shelters as these are experienced by the women. Moreover, it is not enough merely to decide to leave an abusive husband, such a decision must be accompanied by a set of other decisions which signal the new definition of the situation emerging for the victim. Thus, to separate from an abusive husband in many cases involves obtaining a peace bond or a restraining order, the placing of assault charges against him or beginning new child care arrangements. This restructuring of the women's lives should be facilitated by the shelters.

Andrea J. Sedlak's research evaluates the impact of shelter programs on abused women. The findings show that:

1) length of stay was not found to be related to a women's age, race, education, the length of her abusive relationship, number and ages of her children, or her present pregnancy status.

2) Length of stay was found to be correlated with the nature of her relationship with her partner and eventual return to the abuser. Women abused by their husbands were more than twice as likely as others (81%

vs. 39%) to leave in their first week. This may be because they were more likely to return to their partners. The likelihood of not returning to the violent partner was an increasing function of length of stay: 33% of the women who left in week 1 did not return to their partners, 55% (55.6) in week 2, 66% (66.7) in weeks 3 and 4, and 88% in weeks 5 or later.

The results may reflect the shelters impact on the woman, or it may merely indicate that women who intend to not return, avail themselves of the shelter for longer periods. In any case, it does document a clear association between length of time in the shelter and likelihood of returning to an abusive relationship.

Further the study shows a definite association between the degree of exposure to the shelter and the degree of recovery shown on the three measures -depression, self-esteem and feelings of efficacy and psychological independence from the abuser. After two weeks of shelter stay, the residents were less depressed and more hopeful, had a stronger belief in their own control over their lives, had more friends, and believed it less likely they would return to their abuser.

Overall, these empirical studies paint a picture of women who lack the economic means to leave an abusive relationship, are willing to tolerate abuse so long as it does not become too severe or involve the children, and who appear to be very committed to making their relationships last.

MODELS FOR UNDERSTANDING DECISIONS

The empirical studies alone cannot provide a complete description of the causal dynamics underlying the decision to leave an abusive relationship. It will also be necessary to ground such research in theory that allows clear guidance for variable selection, and interpretation of results.

Michael J. Strube has discussed three theoretical models that show promise for guiding the study of relationship decision - psychological entrapment, learned helplessness and relative costs and benefits models. A basic assumption

inherent in developing theoretical models is that the decision to leave or stay in an abusive relationship is a "rational" decision - when considered from the perspective of the decision-maker. The decision is based on an analysis of available "data" and follows predictable "decision rules."

1. Psychological Entrapment

The psychological entrapment model provides a very intriguing framework within which relationship decisions can be examined. In a general sense, the decision to remain in an abusive relationship can be thought of as effort justification. Initially the woman exerts effort to make the relationship work, but as with most abusive relationships these efforts fail and the abuse continues. To justify these past efforts, the woman tries harder under the belief that if she tries hard enough her efforts will succeed. This belief is engendered, of course, by the cultural norm that it is the woman's responsibility to make the relationship work. The more time and effort the woman invests, the harder it becomes to give up without success, and the less likely that an abused woman will leave the relationship (Strube and Barbour, 1983, 1984).

2. Learned Helplessness

Walker (1978, 1983) has suggested that abused women can be characterized as exhibiting learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Learned helplessness arises as a result of a perceived noncontingency between responses and outcomes. The belief that responses have no impact on outcomes reduces the likelihood that new responses (that could end the helplessness) will be initiated.

The learned helplessness model holds promise for helping us understand why some women remain in abusive relationships. However, some women do not remain with their abusers. A truly useful learned helplessness account must be able to explain why some, but not all, women are at risk for continued abuse. Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) have proposed an attributional reformulation of the learned helplessness model. This reformulation states experience with noncontingency between

responses and outcomes is not sufficient by itself to produce the deficits associated with learned helplessness. There is, in addition, an intermediate attribution state that also influences the response to noncontingency. According to Abramson et al. when confronted with noncontingency individuals make causal attributions that can be conceptualized along three dimensions: internal/external, stability and globality. Classic learned helplessness occurs when the noncontingency between responses and negative outcomes is attributed to internal, stable and global causes. Under these circumstances, individuals blame themselves for their negative outcomes and expect them to persist over time, and to extend into other domains of their lives.

On the other hand, helplessness will not be accompanied by self-blame if an external attribution is made. Of importance for our purposes here is the proposition that people vary in their attribution styles.

In light of this attributional reformulation it becomes clear that the learned helplessness model could provide an explanation for why some but not all women remain in abusive relationships.

3. Relative Costs and Benefits

A third conceptual model that can be used to examine relationship decisions derives from exchange theory (e.g., Kelley and Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959) and is based on the premise that relationship decisions follow from an analysis of costs and benefits of current relationships in comparison to alternative relationships. Thus rewards can be greater than or less than costs in the current relationships; and rewards can be greater than or less than costs in the alternative relationship. This gives rise to four coping strategies. According to Pfouts, 1978 when costs are greater than rewards in both the current and alternative relationships the typical coping behavior is the "self-punishing response". In this situation, the wife blames herself for being trapped in a violent marriage in which she can neither change her husband's behavior nor find nonviolent alternatives for herself or her children" (Pfouts, 1978). A second situation which keeps wives in abusive

relationships occurs when the rewards exceed costs in the current relationship, but costs exceed rewards in alternative relationships. In this case, an "aggressive response" is likely where the wife responds to violence with violence, sometimes against her husband but more often against her children as she takes her anger into another violent relationship" (Pfouts, 1978). By contrast, when the rewards of alternative relationships exceed costs, the woman is likely to leave the abusive relationship. The timing of the departure, however, depends on the pay offs in the current relationship. On the other hand, where rewards exceed costs in the abusive relationship, the wife will be reluctant to leave because she has devoted many years to save her marriage. The wife will move into a nonviolent alternative when she finally becomes convinced that the abuse is too high a price for her and her children (Plouts, 1978).

This cost/benefit analysis provided by Pfouts is very useful in identifying multiple responses to abusive relationships (Snyder and Fruchtman, 1981). It also provides an explanation for women who do not become entrapped in continuous abuse and thus provides a nice complement to the entrapment and learned helplessness models.

Although a fair amount of knowledge has accumulated regarding relationship decisions, our understanding of the dynamics of this decision process is still weak.

Current empirical and theoretical approaches to domestic violence reduce the complexity of the problem to several discrete variables. High levels of inferences are used to abstract traits or causes of domestic violence. Authors assume that members of a group share a relatively stable system of symbols and meanings that are self-evident and consistently organized (Collett, 1977). They minimize the intervening subjective meanings of participants and observers regarding domestic violence.

SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF ABUSE

Through language or acts, individuals construct specific meanings for specific situations which may differ significantly from abstract cultural meanings (Berger and Luckman, 1967, Brittan, 1973; Cicourel, 1967, 1974; Douglas, 1970; Harre and Secord, 1973; Scott and Douglas, 1972; Spradley, 1972).

"Violence" may not mean the same things for victims as for abusers or to researchers. Physical acts are unique kinds of social behavior because their "brutishness" or existence cannot be denied (Pearce and Cronen, 1980; Searle, 1969). Yet physical force alone, however destructive it may be, does not translate into violence until it is imbued with social meaning.

Despite the rapidly growing literature concerned with violence between intimate partners, little is known as to when a person will regard a given episode as "battering". Yet such a labeling may be a critical prerequisite to helpseeking.

A.J. Sedlak's research study is an effort in this direction. It explores the dynamics that governs a person's willingness to term an event or series of events "battering". The subjects were undergraduate volunteers from introductory psychology classes at Iowa State University. Three aspects of the findings reported in the research bear on this question.

First, ratings by those with personal experiences of intimate violence concerning their willingness to call their own experience "battering" are an important source of information. Most respondents who had had violent experiences declined to call them "battering", and groups who differed in the types of experiences they had (victim, abuser, both) did not differ overall in their rated willingness to apply the term "battering" to themselves. The analysis identified only one significant correlate of the decision to apply the label to oneself. The degree of maximum injury suffered by participants who had been victims appeared to be a determining factor in their decisions. It was interesting that those in the abuser role were not analogously influenced by the seriousness of the injuries to their partners.

Second, respondents verbal explanations of their decisions about considering themselves to be "battered" confirmed the importance of physical injury as a criteria for using the label. Other important criteria mentioned were: the duration and repetitiveness of the physical abuse itself, whether there was an intention to harm, whether the abuser's anger was justifiable, and the emotional closeness of the relationship apart from the violence.

The third and final source of information on the labelling issue was the factors that affected the respondents' willingness to call the case study episode "battering". As with personal experience, force (and its concomitant consequences) was important in determining the willingness to label the hypothetical situations "battering". Respondents were more willing to call the episode "battering" when the abuser used high force and the victim suffered the more serious consequences.

Thus it appears that one important determinant of a victim's willingness to call an episode "battering" is the seriousness of the physical consequences involved.

Michele Bograd's paper 'How Battered Women and Abusive Men Account for Domestic Violence: Excuses, Justification, or Explanations?' also examines how battered women and abusive men perceive, define and evaluate acts of physical force in their marriages.

In the study, domestic violence is not defined simply by brute physical reality, but through the interpretive meaning systems of participants and observers. Using the theoretical framework of accounts, the study focuses on (1) how do battered women and abusive men account for domestic violence? (2) do accounts function to excuse or justify violence?

The results of her study suggest that battered women and abusive men use different explanatory frameworks to account for personal experiences with domestic violence. When the action falls outside the bounds of expectation, people offer accounts, or interpret their actions to make them more understandable or acceptable to themselves and/or to others. By bridging

action and expectation, they function to neutralize potentially deviant behavior.

There are very few systematic empirical studies about how violent and non-violent men and women think about domestic violence. Based on ethnographic and clinical interviews, it has been suggested that abused women normalize, rationalize or justify their husbands' behaviour on the grounds that he is under stress, mentally ill, under the influence of drugs and alcohol; or that the woman deserved the abuse because she was provocative (Hilberman, 190; Hilberman and Munson, 1977-78; Pagelow, 1981). Such accounts excuse the husbands for their violence. They are evidence of implicit tolerance of domestic violence.

Abusive men rarely define their violence as deviant behavior and attempt to rationalize their behaviors through minimization (I didn't hurt her that bad); denial of intention (I didn't mean to hurt her); confusion (I don't know what happened); outright denial; intoxication; loss of control; and projection of blame onto the woman (Adams and McCormack, 1982; Dobash and Dobash; 1979; Straus, 1980).

In short, these studies suggest that abused women and abusive men provide a range of accounts and that sex differences are there, though no study has directly compared the perceptions of abused women and abusive men.

The findings of Bograd's study show that abused women and abusive men offered a relatively limited set of reasons for why a violent incident occurred while abused women more often perceived their husbands as suffering from chronic emotional problems, both abused women and abusive men perceived domestic violence as due to factors that temporarily reduce the husband's capacity for self-control: transient physical states due to alcohol or drugs, transient psychological states such as loss of control, and external stresses such as job problems.

Since violence was viewed as due to transient factors, the abusive man was rarely labeled as responsible for abuse. More than half the abusive husbands

named the women as the main reason for the incident, most often for her failure to meet the men's expectations of "good wife."

The findings further showed that more abused women than abusive men stated the husband had intended to hurt his wife. In approximately half of the accounts, the domestic violence sample stated that husbands had employed physical force in order to control or influence their wives. In contrast, abusive men stated they had been trying to accomplish a positive or beneficial end, such as facilitating communication or stopping the fight, which was associated with the men's beliefs that they had not intended to hurt their wives.

Abused women more frequently defined the incident as violent than did abusive men. Abused women and abusive men who labelled the act as violent did so on the basis that the act was severe in nature or that the husband was out of control.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the studies (included in this review) provide strong evidence of commonalities in abused women's perceptions of "battering reasons" and their decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship. However, different samples of abused women have been used to study their perceptions of abuse and their decisions to leave an abusive relationship. The findings challenge current empirical and theoretical approaches to domestic violence and suggest that an integrative model of domestic violence must include a component of social meaning.

APPENDIX

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